

California's Water Problems Weren't Caused By a Fish: We Need a 21st Century Water Policy for Fish and People

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NRDC.org

January 29, 2009

Today, we expect that the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) will announce water pumping restrictions in the Bay-Delta to protect longfin smelt from being sucked into the export pumps of the state and federal water projects.

The longfin smelt was historically one of the most abundant fish species in the Bay-Delta, but in the past several decades its population has been plummeting and is now at risk of extinction (joining a long list of species that are declining as a result of unsustainable actions in the estuary). This action was triggered by DFG finding the fish near the export pumps (you can see a map of where the fish currently are here). The restrictions are designed to keep these the fish from being sucked into the pumps, which has been a significant source of mortality: DFG estimates that more than 1.5 million adult and juvenile longfin smelt, and millions more larvae, that have been killed by the water projects since 1993. These protections will be designed to have as little effect on our water supply as possible.

But the truth is the problem didn't start here: a fish is not the cause of California's water crisis. There simply isn't enough rain and snow in a dry year, like this one, to meet projected demands for water (and I should note that up until today, this year there have been no additional pumping restrictions to protect salmon, delta smelt, or longfin smelt). We've known for years that water exports from the Bay-Delta cannot continue growing to meet California's water needs. Both the law and the science were settled awhile ago: we've diverted too much water from the Delta for too long, as the Governor's Delta Vision Task Force recently concluded. And with climate change, the ecological crisis in the Delta, the closure of California's salmon fishery, and the potential for a catastrophic levee failure, if we don't change our ways, the future looks grim for both people and fish.

Indeed, reductions on water exports from the Delta were inevitable. In the early 2000s, water exports were at historically high levels (5 of the 6 highest levels of water exports in the history of the CVP and SWP occurred in the past 8 years). For the foreseeable future, we're likely to have to return to water export levels seen in the 1990s. California is at a crossroads; it can either follow its old course toward drought, failed crops, failing fisheries, and an insufficient drinking water supply - or it can commit to a new, smart-water solution for the 21st century.

We cannot continue to meet California's water needs the way we have in the past. Fortunately, there is a solution. We can obtain real water from a Virtual River of water efficiency, trimming water waste, recycling wastewater, and capturing rainwater in urban areas before it flows into storm drains. There's more water available from these sources than we've ever exported from the Delta.

We're already seeing important steps forward to get the water flowing from these environmentally friendly alternative sources:

Orange County built a water recycling plant that is generating enough drinking water each year for more than 500,000 people, while at the same time cleaning up coastal water quality and reducing electricity use, all at a cost that is comparable to water from the Delta.

The Governor last year called for a 20 percent reduction in per capita water use by 2020, and the State Water Resources Control Board and other agencies are working on implementation plans. Assemblymen Mike Feuer and Jared Huffman have introduced AB 49, an NRDC sponsored bill, to achieve this goal. State agencies, local governments, and water districts (such as the Metropolitan Water District) are providing money to increase water conservation, such as funding homeowners to replace old toilets and showerheads with high efficiency models, and providing tips and advice on how to use water more efficiently.

The omnibus public lands bill (S.22) passed by the U.S. Senate last month authorizes the federal Bureau of Reclamation to fund, design and construct groundwater banks and water recycling projects in California in conjunction with local governments and to restore flows and fish to the San Joaquin River. Like Orange County's plant, these recycling projects could create new water supply while reducing water pollution. The groundwater bank

could help reduce water supply impacts in dry years by banking water in wet years to be utilized during dry years. This bill offers a glimpse of a 21st Century policy for the Bureau of Reclamation: smarter, more cost-effective and environmentally friendly ways of providing water for public use, while helping to restore our rivers and wildlife.

These are the solutions we need to implement today to meet our water needs tomorrow.

It's still relatively early in the water year, and we're all hoping for rain. But hoping for rain isn't a strategy for meeting our water needs today, let alone in the future when climate change makes our existing water supply system ever more tenuous. If we utilize our fish-friendly water solutions, we can meet the needs of Californians - at their faucets and in the fields - as well as our wildlife for generations to come. And we can become the national model for smart-water solutions for the 21st century.